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Analogical associations in the frame of a “neoclassical” semiotic theory

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Abstract. It has been a long time since the concept of iconic signs was introduced by C. S. Peirce. From that time on, we have been increasingly realizing that semiotic systems are for the most part established just on some type of analogy. But the more we see the sphere of analogical signification expanding its domain, the more we become aware of how inadequate is the notion of a simple sign connecting locally a physical object with a second object, or with a meaning. There is, on the other hand, the more refined theory of signification developed by Ferdinand de Saussure, but this theory, by its very definition, is limited to a restricted domain, and definitely does not include the field of those signs that rest on analogical associations.

The main purpose of this article is then to show how the most refined Saussurean model can act as a starting point for a general restatement of semiotics intended to embrace the signs that rest on an analogical basis. We may call this a “neoclassical”, innovative semiotic theory, able to join the latest “sociological” approach with the most precious foundations of our discipline.

A different view on semiotic analogies

There is no doubt that semiotics has suffered a lot due to the numerous ambiguities about concepts such as “analogy”, “similarity” or

miology”, or to the idea of a constitutive role of language in symbolic systems in the very establishment of a social structure in the thought of Émile Durkheim.¹

The main purpose of this article is to show how the more restricted model by Ferdinand de Saussure, usually restricted to the linguistic field, can instead act as a starting point for a general semiotic model primarily intended to embrace the signs which rest on an analogical basis. I can only mention here what we owe to scholars such as Lévi-Strauss or Luis Prieto, who both reworked some facets of Saussurean thought, in a perspective more consonant with the idea of a social science.²

First of all, we have to remark that any possible way of establishing correlations of signs involving “analogies” runs into the multi-

¹ See mainly his seminal work on symbolism, where languages play a central part in a sociological reworking of the Kantian model (Durkheim 1912).

² For an in-depth discussion of the sign model in Lévi-Strauss, see Ferraro 2015. A shortest exposition can be found at www.etnosemiotica.it/programma/levi_strauss_guido_ferraro_levi-strauss_un_maestro_per_una_strada_a_percorrere_contributo.php. For Prieto’s model, see Prieto 1975.

of the many possible ways of tracing the letter “t” in the alphabet: if we have become used to saying that those graphs, even if objectively *dissimilar*, are effectively *equivalent*, this is an account of what makes them positively similar, but on account of differences they share, with regard to other units belonging to the same system.

Keeping up a tradition starting from Saussure and later continued, among others, by Luis Prieto (1975), we must therefore think that different ways of manifesting a signifier are not equivalent because they are inherently similar, but that on the contrary they *look* similar because we assign them the same distinctive features, and accordingly we regard them as equivalent and interchangeable. From the point of view of a speaker, the effect of analogy is so immediately evident that it determines precisely the naive impression that the likeness is “between things themselves”, and that the likeness could be the source of the effect, of an assignment of identity. The analogies we perceive are actually the result of the work of semiotic systems: consequently, *cannot be any semiotic system “founded” on analogies*, but systems that *build and work out* analogies in different ways.

“postmodern” inability to recognize analogies, as in the pers Barbara Maria Stafford.³ The focal point is, for us, that a signs — *every system of signs*, of any kind! — cannot work producing *effects of similarity*, starting from what actually is *of differences*. Usually, we do not underline enough the pri that any semiotic system — even if it has nothing to “iconism” — relies on a mechanism in some respects analogies: a consideration which partly explains the confusions and perplexities in the theoretical treatment of th of “analogy”. In effect, as every system of signs rests on co between classes (on both sides of signifier and signified), common belonging to a class creates such a strong effect of rity”, it follows that in all systems of signs the upshot of always plays *a leading role*.

In order to distinguish this type of similarity from other types, I propose to employ the expression “equi-similarity”.

³ “Today, however, we possess no language for talking about resemblance, an exaggerated awareness of difference” (Stafford 1999: 10).

This “classical” theoretical model is not only stylish and re-also operationally effective, and attentive to the functional dynamics of signs. Moreover, it is capable of linking very well the dynamics operating at the systemic level with the psychological that signs take in the mind of speaking people. For these reasons should be definitely preferred to the reworking carried out by Hjelmslev, that is too abstract and unrealistic from the very beginning and later overwhelmed by too many inconsistent exploitations. The main problem is that, in its original view, the “classical” model was conceived exclusively for the arbitrary signs, a case unique and very relevant but also quite atypical. The idea on which this model is founded is that there are no actual reasons to exclude the v

⁴ See the critical attitude taken by Luis Prieto (1975), and more recently François Rastier (2001: 58, ff). Concerning inconsistent exploitations, everyone can find some examples, but I could start remembering a classical review by C. G. evaluating the many different and “hazardous” suggestions around the model to match the Hjelmslevian quadripartition in the domain of literature (chapter 1 in Segre 1985).

examine the matter carefully, it is not a question of single events but of sequences. We are building on settled patterns of events, structures set at a higher level (*scripts*, if you want).

As in the perception of our experience of life, according to Peirce, that we learn to apply in our very first months of life, events are put together in a sequence, this allows us to go back logically, passing from one link in the chain to another: something roughly similar to what in semiotics is called a “syntagmatic chain”. The form of the chain allows us to both go upstream, from the effect to the cause (common examples are: from the footprint in the snow to the passing of the bear, from the smoke to the fire, etc.), or to go downstream, from the cause to the effect (from the black clouds to the likelihood of rain). This is the case for “natural” signs, as well as for human indexical behavior: if a person is wearing very expensive clothes, this is the result of available money (upstream connection), while if it happens that our interlocutor is impatiently looking at his watch, a downstream connection allows us to interpret this behavior as expressing a concern for a flow of time which is passing towards a subsequent occurrence.

an index is something that has a *real, physical* connection to an object. “The index has no generality in itself. It does not depend on mental association” (WP 5: 379). But in the same article Peirce also suggests that index can also be seen as a token of a general concept, as it happens when I know that it is raining because I notice the presence of people with their umbrellas up (the open umbrella asserts the truth of a “mental association”, *ibid.*). So we are probably not far from other, brighter aspects of Peircean thought, when we realize that an index works in conformity with the “classical” model of a *signifier* is not a single object at a local level (a cloud, for instance), but a model — in Saussurean terms, the “mental image” — which encompasses together all the possible, *equi-similar* black clouds: a mental representation of a general value, of which the cloud I am seeing now is nothing but a local manifestation. All the possibilities of rain are “similar”, all the black clouds are “similar”: the indexical relations cannot be reduced to leaving aside the form of likeness that I call “equi-similarity”.

The triangulation *objectual representamen* → *interpretant* can therefore be usefully replaced with the more unequivocal and better developed quadripartite structure: *physical or textual* →

(primarily the alphabetical writing), almost all our expressive power is based on an analogical ground. First of all, we have to go beyond the idea of a coincidence between analogical signification and visual expression. I agree with what Göran Sonesson (1994: 74) wrote: “in Peirce’s theory there is nothing intrinsically visual about iconicity”. So, we cannot see an analogical way of working in systems not strictly nor exclusively visual, like theatre, cinema and television, but also in systems not strictly nor exclusively nothing to do with the visual, like poetry, music, or the field of literature. It’s not even nothing right huge and diversified — of narrative production, of visual production though here we’ll stick to visual instances, and more specifically to photographic or cinematographic images, we’ll do so to emphasize the awareness of the extent and multiplicity of all that belongs to the semiosis based on analogical correlations.

A light in the dark

According to what I consider the brighter view of Peircean semiotics, the sign reference exists only in the mind of an interpreter,

assumption immediately underlines how any recognition of *the* implies an actual process of *interpretation*. But this conception is capable of saving us from the common idea that analogy consists in *thing to another thing*, making it easier to adopt the view that in the case of icons, the semiotic structure links two abstract and mental configurations, the signifier and the signified.

Of course, some common examples, as those of photos or identity cards or documentary images, present us with cases where there is no doubt that an image refers to a specific object in the world. There is an interesting and yet particular use, which assimilates the icon to what in the language are the “proper nouns”, designating individual entities. But in most cases the ways we employ icons are more complex, and in the semiotic real life the analogical configurations are conceived with expressive and interpretative aims, well beyond the aim of simply pointing to something there in the world.

It is not my aim here to discuss in detail the Peircean view of iconism, but I think they are too prone to a sort of “naturalistic illusion”, speaking in Greimas’ terms. I remember here the example by Nelson Goodman (1968: 50): “Before me is a p

supposed local level. I will refer to the incipit of a film which has a special relevance from a semiotic point of view. *The Sixth Sense*, directed by M. Night Shyamalan in 1999, can be seen as a text that plays with the ways we read our experience; moreover, anybody who has seen the film knows how the film plays with the reactions and the feelings of the spectators, and with the slight boundary between what we see and what we know. The film incipit belongs to this subtle and mysterious game. Although almost nobody pays attention to it, at least when watching for the first time, the very opening of the text is an unusual shot which, for a full eighteen lengthy seconds, shows us a light bulb gradually switching on, moving from total dark to light.

As (the author is right, indeed) we are actually fully mislead when we try to interpret what we see, we tend to take this shot as a stylistic and stylish way of starting the story, immediately consenting to its narrative and diegetic justification: it's the lighting of a cellar, where the wife of the main character is going to take a bottle of wine, in order to celebrate a special occasion. But if we pay more careful attention, we realize that the bulb turning on in the dark can be understood as an occurrence of a sign that, just in the beginning of the text, briefly points to

established *type*: the type “light coming on in the dark”, meaning “process that conveys a knowledge in an area previously unclear”. This general model is located *not in the* in the cultural system.

Where analogies live: beyond text-oriented semiotics

So, we understand that there is a fundamental alternative between two greatly different modes of conceiving the sign. The first position assumes that semiotic relations are entities located inside the text, so that therefore texts could be seen as “composed of signs”. As we have seen, it is not so easy to sustain, *text-oriented semiotics* (Greimas in his place) often appears as fluctuating between two options. On the other hand, we notice a not fully rationalized tendency to laying down a troublesome notion of “sign”, along with the incorrect relation

sufficient to generalize to every kind of sign what the author says about symbols (such as in CP 2.249), stating that every sign is a symbol by virtue of a law, on the strength of an association of generalization, hence qualifying as “a general type or law, [...] a Legisign”.

Of course, this way of seeing deeply transforms our approach to textuality. Sure, in every semiotic system the specific textualizations show inevitable and constitutive variations. In fact, all variations are variations. In the case of our example we are able to envisage a broad range of variants: instead of an electric bulb, we could see the headlights of a car, an electric torch, or maybe the rays of a rising sun. These variants can turn out to be interesting, and perhaps to be capable of conveying some color, but they still remain variants that carry a common meaning and can therefore substitute each other. Thus, these various kinds of light constitute a case of what we call “equi-similarity”, and consequently a class of entities capable of expressing the same signified. Therefore, they set up what we call a “signifier”, culturally linked to a given signified. At a theoretical level, we understand now

⁵ See the entry *Signe* in the *Dictionnaire* by Greimas and Courtés (1977).

everything we see back to already known categories, a way of seeing which could stop any inventiveness and any discovery. We have to be open to what can surprise us, be willing to attach importance to relevant differences, and so be ready to reorganize our knowledge. As we see in the film, we can learn a lot from other people's experiences and different ways of viewing. Therefore, we should bear in mind that our classifications are temporary and relative, negotiated and contested, and subjective; they can be as much conservative as innovative. It is the duty of the arts to show us that there are different ways of categorizing the world.

If we now want to make fully explicit the reason why the light switching on in the dark can be seen as a token of a signifier (a signifier related to a certain concept), there is no doubt that we are facing *an association based on analogy*: straightforwardly, darkness metaphorically expresses the concept of “ignorance”, as light metaphorically expresses the concept of “knowledge”, so that darkness and light, on the one hand, and coming of light and opening of knowledge, on the other hand, constitute two couples of *analogs*. And here we see the effect of analogy (a culturally constructed analogy, of course).

be now better specified. Moreover, unlike *equi-similar* variations, *rel-analogous* terms are not reversible: the darkness, which is that can be easily manifested (textualized) in a perceptually physical way, stands for an abstract concept as “to not know, not understand”. Similarly, we can use a map as standing for a configuration of a territory, but there couldn’t be any sense in using a territory as standing for a map.⁶ In general terms, we always use the single case stands for the general type, the part for the whole, and so on. What’s involved, then, is *not a mere relation of similarity*. This connection implies a *dissymmetry* too, between *simple* and *complex*. We know very well that a map is useful just because it is a *schematization*, reduced and simplified. But it is the *simplicity* of the pictorial representation, that is always more essential in comparison with the represented scene or person: a reduction where, it is noted, a quantitative *less* corresponds to a *more* of significance.

⁶ This type of dissymmetry has already been remarked; see Wallin 1976, Sebeok 1976: 128. Göran Sonesson has discussed the question in detail, see Sonesson 1994, 1998.

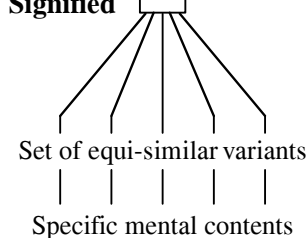


Figure 1. Rel-analogy and equi-similarity.

⁷ It is interesting to notice how this is a widespread idea, common in popular handbooks for photography enthusiasts. See for instance, "camera photographs involves the practice of subtractive thinking. [...] being a sculptor of images who chips away at a monolithic block of reality, only what is absolutely necessary remains and then relies on each viewer to fill the missing pieces to complete the meaning" (Hirsch 2008: 34–35).

which moves from an allusion to its reference, the mod govern synesthetic connections and formal parallelisms, and Analogical correlations may have a figurative nature or, as the “plastic” one; they may stick to limited points in the text or features recurring in different parts (something like what Eco calls *expressive textures* (Eco 1976: 210)). This articulation of means still remains to be defined and analyzed, in the viewpoint of a grammar of the forms of analogical expression.

A very effective type of analogical association (roughly responding to traditional “synecdoche”) is the one which links a single case to the *whole* it belongs to, a *modus operandi* common to photography, for instance in the field of reportage. This procedure allows analogical communication to operate through “scraps” of great efficiency, able to thicken semantic values using a sophisticated manner, both types of analogy we are talking of. How it works. Schematically, the photographer investigates a situation (a war scenery, an urban area presenting a particular characterization, and so on), trying to understand it, sorting out the most relevant aspects, and so developing a *mental interpretation*.

other portions (in our terms, be “equi-similar” to the ultimately equivalent to the whole — what in current speech “to be *representative*”. Both in the relation part-to-part relation part-to-whole, we see in action forms of *equi-similarity* are far from being either simple or obvious. I mean that this makes us understand that the photograph he produced is semiotically equivalent to other photographs that, in the same way, he or someone else could have produced, as variants of a signifier that brings us a given concept (the intolerable cruelty for instance).

Perhaps, considering the example of the electric bulb, you have thought that our theoretical model could apply only to things working as symbols or metaphors, but not to images more broadly “real” starting point, like in the realm of journalism. But, if we pay more serious attention, in the case of reporting, too, the reality of every image departs from *a meaning that has to be expressed* by the exclusion of instances where strictly, and maybe almost necessarily, someone set oneself “not to say anything”. But of course there is an image fully devoid of any meaning, a mere impersonal

steps and procedures, pacts and guarantees, *all that*, truly, is *in the image* he is showing us, all that is exposed and presented as part of the apparatus that ultimately sets up its meaning.

We perceive the reasons of his clipping, the logic of his choice, his search for that specific perspective, and so on. As John Berger points out, every time we look at a photograph, we are aware of the photographer selecting that sight; photographic images do not show things, but relations between things and observers (Berger 1969: 19). Not far from here are the words by Philippe Dubois (1983: 9): “*en photographie, il ne nous est plus possible de penser l’image en dehors de l’acte qui la fait être*”⁸. Most images, as again John Berger (1969) says, look as *quotations of reality*; but it should be added that they are mainly pointing out just the ideal marks in the quotation. Under any creation of an analogical reference, there is out a smouldering metasemiotic dimension (“Look: this is an image someone *made* this image...”).

⁸ “dealing with photographs, we cannot any more consider the image as the action that creates them”

Sense. We gave to those images a perhaps convincing reading, but could they have more, different readings? Let us say that, like this black screen gradually brightening, we can definitely find an allusion to the very same process of the film projection: an aspect sustained by many subsequent mentions to the power of images, or sounds, and by the amazingly symmetrical finale, where the image vanishes in a fully white light (as the protagonist — the film — to another film showing inside the film — eventually reaches an unreachable and terrible truth).

Then, could we say if the “right interpretation” is the one mentioned before (Topic: how we can understand the world) or the one suggested now (Topic: how cinema creates a representation of life)? Or perhaps the first one is a partial and provisional reading and the latter brings us to the ultimate meaning? We could instead say that crucial is just the way the analogical references stratify in this film talks about how knowledge arises, but cinema is in itself a vehicle of knowledge; the deepest meaning is in the conjunction of different levels: light equals knowledge, light equals cinema, cinema equals knowledge...

section of a video tape: multiple parallel and equi-similar (and we could easily add more of them). Which one “is the meaning” and which one is the mere vehicle of that meaning? We feel that authentic meaning is not lying in a specific level, but in the overall outline of their correspondence, and we could not tell the “meaning”, if not making use of another metaphorical vehicle. For instance, recognizing that knowledge is not merely “a light”, but at the moment it is breaking the darkness, like a divergent, a point of presence where its absence is rule. The meaning of all those levels may be clear to our mind, but it does not reside somewhere on a specific level: it exists only in the analogy that intersects them. Perhaps this could bring us to the best definition for the concept of “signified” in the case of a complex iconic sign: signified is the abstract logic that underlies all the different expressive variations of a common conceptual form.

There is a theory about it, incomplete but fascinating, as the working of semiotic systems with an analogical basis has been explored in depth by Claude Lévi-Strauss, mainly in his books about primitive native mythologies. He leads us to think that such systems

local and specific level, the actual outcome of analogical conflict seems to mainly move in a quite different direction. Even in the case of a photograph shot by a reporter in a definite place and situation, we are inclined to feel that, say, this child in the image had been chosen by our eyes not for what he personally is, but because he is similar to many other children, tormented in that war, a war whose nature is similar to the cruelty of any other war, and similar also to the nature of many other circumstances where violence overwhelms the innocent. A bitter truth, made visible in the face of this child, here and there, closing hypothesis is therefore that we use icons not just because of their aptitude to describe something but, more often than not, because of their powerful faculty of generalizing, categorizing, connecting, so reassuring us that sense is not only *thinkable* in our mind but *everywhere*, widespread and truly *present* in the world: images show things, but thoughts.

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Много времени прошло с тех пор, как Чарльзом Пирсом было введено понятие иконических знаков. Но чем шире становится область обозначения на основе аналогии, тем более очевидным становится то, что концепция простой логической связи физического знака с другим объектом или ментальным энтитетом недостаточна. С другой стороны, существует созданная Фердинандом де Соссюром более рафинированная теория знака, но она по существу направлена на более ограниченную область и не учитывает знаков, основанных на аналогии.

В статье показано, каким образом, исходя из теории знаков, ставя своей целью рассмотреть и знаки, основанные на аналогии, можно переформулировать теорию знаков. В итоге можно предложить «неоклассическую» инновационную семиотическую теорию, которая способна соединить в себе более поздний «социосемиотический» подход с основами нашей дисциплины.

nevaid märke, võib pakkuda võimaluse märgiteooria ümber-
rimiseks. Nii võime me rääkida „neoklassikalisest” inno-
semiootikateooriast, mis on suuteline endas ühendama hilisem
semiootilise” lähenemise meie distsipliini oluliste põhialustega.